

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2246

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E.O. 11652: XGDS

TAGS: OVIP, PFOR, IS

SUBJ: VICE PRESIDENT'S MEETING WITH CHIEF RABBI YOSEF

REF: STATE 75493

1. FOLLOWING IS OUR RESPONSE TO DEPARTMENT'S REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON CHIEF RABBI OVADIAH YOSEF.

- (A) CORRECT FORM OF ADDRESS: CHIEF RABBI
 - (B) FLUENCY IN LANGUAGES OTHER THAN HEBREW: ENGLISH-NONE; ARABIC-UNDERSTANDS BUT DOES NOT SPEAK. RABBINICAL COURT HAS TOLD US THAT YOSEF WILL BE TAKING AN INTERPRETER TO US.
 - (C) EXACT BIRTHDATE: DAY AND MONTH UNKNOWN (NO BIRTH RECORDS AVAILABLE). BORN 1919 IN BAGHDAD, IRAQ.
 - (D) ATTITUDE TOWARD US: EXTREMELY FRIENDLY.
 - (E) CURRENT POLITICAL AFFILIATION: NONE. YOSEF HAS NOT FORMALLY AFFILIATED HIMSELF WITH ANY OF ISRAEL'S RELIGIOUS PARTIES BUT HE IS PROBABLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX PARTIES.
 - (F) RELATIONS WITH CHIEF RABBI SHLOMO GOREN: RELATIONS BETWEEN TWO CHIEF RABBIS HAS BEEN DESCRIBED TO US AS "WORSE THAN TERRIBLE" BY KNOWLEDGEABLE SOURCES. GOREN AND YOSEF ARE BARELY ON SPEAKING TERMS AND THIS OF COURSE AFFECTS WORK AND FUNCTIONING OF CHIEF RABBINATE. BAD RELATIONS BETWEEN YOSEF AND GOREN PRACTICALLY DATE BACK TO TIME OF THEIR ELECTION AS CHIEF RABBIS. YOSEF TOOK EXCEPTION TO SEVERAL CONTROVERSIAL
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DECISIONS HANDED DOWN BY CHIEF RABBINICAL COURT ON GROUNDS

THAT GOREN HAD PUSHED THROUGH DECISIONS BY STEAMROLLER TACTICS, THERE HAD NOT BEEN PROPER CONSULTATIONS BETWEEN GOREN AND YOSEF PRIOR TO ARRIVING AT DECISIONS AND, FINALLY, DECISIONS WERE BASED ON POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY RATHER THAN HALACHA (RELIGIOUS LAW).

(G) YOSEF IS REGARDED AS VERY RIGID IN HIS INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS LAW BY LIBERAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS. BECAUSE OF HIS NONINVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL MATTERS, WE HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF HOW HE IS REGARDED BY ISRAELI POLITICIANS.

(H) I PAID COURTESY CALL ON YOSEF RECENTLY AND FOUND HIM TO BE A WARM, HOSPITABLE PERSON. HE IS SOFT-SPOKEN AND OBVIOUSLY VERY WELL DISPOSED TOWARD AMERICANS. THERE IS A DISTINCT "OTHER WORLDLY" AND SPIRITUAL CAST TO HIS CHARACTER.

(I) YOSEF IS MARRIED AND HAS ELEVEN CHILDREN, SIX GIRLS AND FIVE BOYS, SUGGESTING ASPECTS TO HIS CHARACTER OTHER THAN "OTHER WORLDLY" ONES. HIS WIFE, MARGALIT, WAS BORN IN ALLEPO, SYRIA, IN 1928. SHE WILL ACCOMPANY YOSEF TO US.

2. DURING HIS MEETING WITH VICE PRESIDENT FORD, WE UNDERSTAND YOSEF WILL EXPRESS APPRECIATION FOR US SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL AND RAISE SUBJECTS OF JEWS IN ARAB COUNTRIES (PARTICULARLY SYRIA) AND FATE OF ISRAELI POWS HELD BY SYRIA. ONLY SENSITIVE SUBJECT WHICH WE BELIEVE SHOULD NOT BE DISCUSSED IS RELATIONS BETWEEN YOSEF AND GOREN.
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